

Werner Simon, November 9, 1977

Q: When were you born?

A: In 1906.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In Magdeburg, in Germany.

Q: What was the total population of Magdeburg?

A: About 200,000.

Q: And about how many Jewish families?

A: Maybe 500.

Q: And what was the relationship between the Jewish children and the Christian children?

A: They were very good.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: In Magdeburg.

Q: How high an education did you receive?

A: I got the high school certificate.

Q: Do you think the Jews of Magdeburg were well integrated into German society?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Was there anyway in which they were kept apart?

A: Well, I had trouble in school because once we had a celebration and reports and I was chosen for that and there was an argument that I was a Jew and I shouldn't do it. That was one of the things. My parents lived there until 1938 or 1939.

Q: When you say they didn't want you to read this poem, how was that resolved.

A: I didn't read it.

Q: What did you hope to become after school?

A: I became an opera singer.

Q: How did you study for this?

A: I went to the Academy in Berlin.

Q: Was that usual for a Jewish boy?

A: It didn't make any difference.

Q: Did you come from a religious home?

A: Religious but not orthodox.

Q: Did you belong to a congregation in Magdeburg?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of congregation?

A: It was liberal, not orthodox.

Q: You were too young to serve in the first world war but what do you remember of the time.

A: I remember the revolution. I remember that when my father was in the army and as soon as the revolution started, he threw his uniform out of the window.

Q: When you say the revolution, what do you mean?

A: After they lost the war, Kaiser Wilhelm was thrown out and there was fighting in the streets and

Q: Why did your father throw his uniform out of the window?

A: Because he didn't want to be anymore in the Army. It was more or less communist inspired.

Q: What year did you go to Berlin to study?

A: In 1927.

Q: What were conditions like in Germany after the loss of the war and the inflation?

A: Let's say in 1922 they stabilized the money and I remember I was working in Magdeburg before I went to Berlin, I had to go to the Reichsbank and I got bags with money and it was worthless so a few years later I got the first dollar and a dollar was from four million marks so you couldn't buy anything at that time.

Q: What were you working at in Magdeburg?

- A: Commercial but then I stopped that because I always was singing and I had lessons in Magdeburg already and then I went to Berlin.
- Q: How long did you study in Berlin?
- A: I went there in 1927 and my father had a friend who was a connoisseur of voice and he was the agent for Sol Hurok and Hurok came over and he formed an German Grand Opera and Madame Gottsky she was a member of the Metropolitan Opera here, she was a prima donna and I got a contract and I went over to America in 1929 for four months with the German Grand Opera and performed all over the country. For instance, I was singing in the City Opera building, then we went to California, all over the country. We had our own train and our own orchestra and all that. That was 1929. I came back home after four months and came back to America again the next year.
- Q: Again on tour?
- A: Yes. After I came back in 1930, I got a contract in Germany as an opera singer in one of the smaller theaters – I was very young at that time. Then I was a member of a few other productions until 1933 – then it was over because I was thrown out of the Theater Kammern – that was the equity and then I became a member of a very famous Jewish Choir. It was the Wienerwehr Choir – 30 Jewish men. Actually the name was the Thirty Jewish Singers from Germany and we toured all over the East. We started in Czechoslovakia and then we went to Vienna, Budapest, Yugoslavia and we ended in Palestine.
- Q: You mentioned that you were thrown out in 1933 immediately when Hitler came to power.
- A: Yes. But then that time we were in Palestine and we had an agent and he let us down so we were working I remember in a Kibbutz, a German Kibbutz. I fell sick and I had to leave Palestine, I wanted to stay there but it was impossible. I had to go back to Italy and emigrate immediately after that and I went back to Germany.
- Q: You mentioned you wanted to stay in Palestine, did you mean permanently?
- A: Yes. And then after that, I was working for the Zionist organization in Berlin.
- Q: Were you still a member of this choir?
- A: No, that disbanded.
- Q: After you came back from Palestine.
- A: Yes, but Mr. Wienerwehr was here in New York and I think he had a choir here but he passed away. He was a very famous choir master. And now we came to 1938.
- Q: You were working in Berlin.
- A: Yes. I studied for Hazzanut in Berlin.

- Q: Why did you decide to do that?
- A: Because I always wanted to stay a singer and I studied and I was ordained as a cantor in Germany and I did some High Holiday services with the Cantor Golanin and then in 1939, I emigrated to England. I met my wife, my late wife already 1927, it would be 50 years this month, and in England I became a cantor.
- Q: Let me just retrace a moment. You said that you were in Berlin for Kristallnacht. What happened on Kristallnacht?
- A: Well, all the synagogues were burned. Then ransacked the stores. They marked them “Jew”. They smashed the windows and then started that they took the Jewish men to the concentration camps. I was lucky because I was that time still working part-time for the Zionist organization.
- Q: You think you weren’t taken because you were working for the Zionist organization?
- A: Yes. But I was sleeping one night there and one night there. It was terrible. You walked through glass and each time – I remember when we were in England and the Germans came over and bombed and the glass was in the street and it was the same thing – we walked through glass.
- Q: During all this time, since you were dismissed from your position in 1933 already, had you ever thought of emigrating before?
- A: Yes, yes. Actually I wanted to go back to Palestine.
- Q: Was that possible?
- A: No. I would have been trained for a hallutz and I don’t think I could have done it. But nevertheless, I worked during my stay in Palestine because we were let down by the agent. I worked for the city of Tel Aviv manually – in the street between Tel Aviv and Jaffa – we did some work.
- Q: What happened to you personally immediately after Kristallnacht?
- A: Nothing to me personally. As I said, I didn’t sleep at home and then through my work in the Hehalutz in the Meineckestrasse in the Zionist organization, I got a permit to go to England for my wife, I got a domestic permit so we emigrated to London.
- Q: When did you apply to go to England?
- A: Oh, that was very fast. In 1939.
- Q: Did you need any guarantee of support?
- A: No. I had a permit. I had to say that I work whatever I get, from the Begrubsberger House, that was the refugee committee. So, I got it very fast and I went over August, 1939 and I worked a few months there and I became a singer for – in a liberal synagogue in a choir and the organist

heard me and she recommended me to one of the famous singers, German singers, Madame Gerhard and from then on, I became an opera singer again in England.

Q: Did you join a company?

A: Yes, I got a contract for the Tales of Hoffman and I worked there 15 months, only Tales of Hoffman. I was singing Speranzani. And then from there on, I did some musical comedies and then I became a member of the Royal Carosa Opera Company until I came here to America.

Q: Was it your intention to re-emigrate from England to America?

A: Yes, I had already, I was already on the waiting list already in Berlin. I had a number but that didn't work out. But I want to tell you something what happened to me in London. When we went to the American consulate to get our visa, the American consul asked me how come that you didn't had to go to the concentration camp? So I was flabbergasted at that question and I reported it and I heard that the consul was recalled to America because of this anti-Semitic attitude. So we came to America and I worked here for commercial companies and then I became a cantor here on 182<sup>nd</sup> Street and Audubon Avenue. There was a small reform synagogue and I became cantor there.

Q: Just let me retrace a little. How did you feel on the day you left Germany? Were you married already?

A: No, we were married in England.

Q: Well, how did you feel on the day that you left?

A: Well, with on dry and one laughing eye. I went a few days before the war broke out and my wife came with the last boat from Holland to London.

Q: When you said one dry eye and one laughing eye, could you explain this a little?

A: Well, I was very happy to leave and that I could escape the Nazis but I left all my family there – my mother and my parents-in-law and my sister-in-law. Still we were friends, we were not yet married, yes, we were engaged. But what could I do – I had to save my life.

Q: What happened to these relatives?

A: My mother-in-law, my father-in-law, my mother, they all were in Theresienstadt. We tried to find out through the Red Cross and we got the reply and we heard they don't live anymore. They died in Theresienstadt.

Q: How early were they taken to Theresienstadt?

A: 1940, I think.

Q: At that time, you were still in London?

A: Yes. We heard through the Red Cross in London.

Q: When did you come to the U.S.?

A: In 1947. I was a member of the Royal Carosa Opera Company until the day we left for America.

Q: When you came to America, was it difficult for you to get this job as a cantor?

A: Yes. First I tried through Hurok to become a singer here again. I auditioned and there was a very strong competition because good looking men and young men – I wasn't so young anymore so I didn't get it. One of the agents said listen, they are looking for a base-baritone, would you like to do it? So I said yes and it was a small synagogue and I was in the choir and they had one of the – for one of the holidays they had a cantor and I guessed he is not Jewish. So I knew all the – they had the same music as we had in Germany so I went to the President and said "Here I am, I know everything and I have a voice. Why do you engage a non-Jew? So I got that job and I was there for about ten years, until they couldn't do it anymore because you know the neighborhood was Spanish that time already. They smashed the windows of the synagogue so they discontinued that service.

Q: When you got off the boat in 1947, where did you go then?

A: I took the first papers out. Really, I knew New York and I said to my wife, now we go and become Americans and that's what we did. Then we started to find jobs. My wife got a job easier than I did. She was working in an office.

Q: Had she been trained to do this in Germany?

A: Oh yes. She was a girl Friday.

Q: Did you come immediately to Washington Heights?

A: No. We had first one small room on 116<sup>th</sup> Street opposite the campus and then we moved up to 140<sup>th</sup> Street and then we were living here on Cummins Street and then in 1975 we moved to this apartment.

Q: Why were you attracted to the 116<sup>th</sup> Street area?

A: Because my brother and sister-in-law lived there. It was a rooming house and we were very lucky to get a small room there first and then we moved to other rooms in the same building. And then we got an apartment on 140<sup>th</sup> Street. It was still good that time, 1948, 49 and then we moved up to Washington Heights.

Q: Did you have any children?

A: No.

- Q: I would like to go back to when you were younger in Germany for a moment. When you lived in Magdeburg and you were working before you went to Berlin, did you know anyone who belonged to the Hitler Youth or the Party?
- A: Yes, in the same office as I was working there were a few people who belonged to the Hitler Youth and I always had trouble with them.
- Q: When Hitler came to power, you were already in Berlin, was there a marked difference between the gentile attitude towards the Jews?
- A: Yes. Especially not in Berlin but in the little city I was working in as a singer, we had people there who were very anti-Semitic but they couldn't do anything but the first moment when Hitler came to power, they became S.A. men and S.S. men and so on.
- Q: When you say you had trouble, what do you mean?
- A: Well, they ignored me. They couldn't do anything else. They did no bodily harm but otherwise it was very, very uncomfortable.
- Q: Did you think of emigrating at this time?
- A: Yes, as soon as I came back from America, I applied for the family for an affidavit. I had relatives here in New York but that time I didn't like to go there, I liked to enjoy myself so I didn't get the affidavit. This was when I traveled in America.
- Q: When you went to Palestine, you had to go back to Germany?
- A: Yes. I went up to the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and applied for a permanent home in Palestine – I was already a member of a kibbutz and he said there are too many illegal people here in Palestine – we can't do it. You have to go out and you have to come back.
- Q: You mean you have to come back legally.
- A: Yes. You go to Italy and you go back later.
- Q: When you left Germany, did you think there was any possibility that Hitler could be short lived?
- A: That time, no. That time he was very much in power already.
- Q: Did you think this in the beginning?
- A: All the Jews said that doesn't matter, he won't last long but they were mistaken. And it is the same here. I mean anti-Semitism is rising here terrifically. The Jews should be aware of it.
- Q: Do you remember the election of 1932?
- A: Very little.

Q: Did most people know that a vote for Hindenburg was a vote for Hitler?

A: Hindenburg was an old man. He was senile already that time.

Q: Did the Jews align themselves with the Social Democrats?

A: Well, with the Democrats. They even were members of the right parties. My late brother-in-law was a member of the right parties. I couldn't understand it because I was a democrat. I voted democrat and my father voted democrat.

Q: When you say right, do you mean conservative party?

A: Yes. Conservative.

Q: When you left Germany, were you only able to take the 10RM?

A: Yes, and it happened that I had more than 10 RM on me and I nearly missed the train to Holland because they made trouble. I sent it back to my fiancée. I went with 10 RM.

Q: How did they make trouble?

A: Well, it was at the frontier, you know. They examined my luggage and they said well, you know, you shouldn't have more than 10 RM and it took such a long time until they gave me the okay that I can go back to the train – it was already moving. But as I went on a permit to England, I had no trouble. They picked me up at the harbor and I was living in a hostel in London for quite a while and then I got my own room and during the Blitz, the committee moved out to the country. My wife was in London.

Q: How do you feel today about the Wiedergutmachung?

A: Well, I get it.

Q: How do you feel about it?

A: Well, I say the people – because I'm very anti-German, very. I wouldn't buy anything from Germany, no food, nothing. So they say but you get Wiedergutmachung. I say that it what they had stolen. That is only repayment of money which they had taken from us.

Q: Have you ever been back to Germany?

A: No. I wouldn't go.

Q: Why not?

A: I hate them. I wouldn't go to Germany and I don't understand that people are going there. I always ask them when they say how wonderful it was, I ask them do you know America? Have you traveled in America? If you don't, stay here and don't go to Germany.



- Q: What about people who feel that it is really their home country or want to see their home town?
- A: That I can't tell you. Some are going to their home town – they want to see the cemeteries. But I know a few of my friends who would never go back to Berlin. My sister-in-law for instance she once was in Germany to visit relatives but she wouldn't go to Berlin.
- Q: Why specifically not Berlin?
- A: Because she comes from Berlin and she went through all that.
- Q: When did she come over here?
- A: In 1945.
- Q: Do you feel yourself today more a part of the American mainstream or more a part of the German Jewish community in New York?
- A: American. As I told you I'm very active in the organizations here. I'm a member of the Free Sons of Israel, the oldest national Jewish organization here and I'm a member of the B'nai B'rith and I'm very active.
- Q: Are most of your friends Americans or German- Jews?
- A: German Jews.
- Q: In comparing your early career as a singer and your singing here in the U.S., how would you compare the opportunities?
- A: Well, the opportunities here for singers is they have to be young. If you hear the auditions, they are all young people. I don't think there's much of an opportunity for well – I retired, I'm not singing anymore, for men over 45. Let's say there's not much of an opportunity for a singer here while we had in Germany and in England in every little city an opera house, we do not have it here. You know, they are touring here too. So there is not much of an opportunity and they get here from all countries the best singers and when you hear the Rigoletto opening night, it is wonderful.
- Q: Do you go to the cultural activities in New York?
- A: Not much.
- Q: Did you in Germany?
- A: Yes, yes. I did and I did in England. When we were touring, the English people were queuing up days and days for tickets. They were very enthusiastic.
- Q: Why don't you go as much here?
- A: I'm too busy with other things.

Q: You mentioned that you were very active in Israel organization. How do you feel in your relationship to Israel as an American?

A: I'm strongly pro-Israel, of course. And I suffer very much if you hear the report this morning that they were fighting again and that there were casualties.

Q: How do you feel about Jewish successes in America like Kissinger or Koch.

A: Well, I don't feel the same as many other people do that we shouldn't vote for Koch or Kissinger because they are Jews and if anything is going on, they will blame the Jews. I don't feel like that. If anything is going wrong, they blame Mr. Koch as a democrat, not as a Jew.

Q: Do you feel that you would have been different had nothing happened?

A: Perhaps, perhaps. Because I, until Hitler came to power, I had my job and I had my hope and I had my family there. I couldn't tell you that but I think I would have lived my life in Germany.